

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents  
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary, Agency of Education  
COPY: Aly Richards, Director of Special Projects and Intergovernmental Affairs,  
Governor's Office  
SUBJECT: School Climate and Culture – Suggestions and Resources  
DATE: December 8, 2014

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Several incidents this past week have put school climate and culture at the front of our minds. I have been thinking of you and your students in the context of recent decisions in Ferguson and New York, and am mindful of the changing demographics of Vermont and the digital interconnectedness of our state and world.

We earn the trust of the students and families we serve by demonstrating consistent care and regard for all, including those who carry extra challenges related to inequality. We also earn it by working proactively to protect the rights of all our students to learn in a safe and supportive environment.

We all know schools are critically important spaces to help students develop understanding of the world around them. Currently, our nation is embroiled in controversy related to the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown through interaction with police in their respective communities. Through social media, traditional media, and their families, older students are certainly aware of the issues and would benefit from structured opportunities to process their questions, opinions and understandings.

For schools and teachers who are dedicating learning time to discussing these issues, we support your use of time for this purpose. Helping our young people to be thoughtful consumers of media, to understand the range of issues involved in our judicial system and the subsequent dissent, to understand their role in a pluralistic society, and to gain awareness of the different ways in which racial tensions affect society all lead to producing the 21st Century learners that Vermont values.

Simultaneously, we have a responsibility to students and families to engage in these conversations in ways that promote growth and understanding but which do not foment negative feelings. We do not recommend leading young children in these discussions; their families should take the lead in determining what information they will share with their children. For students in middle and high school, educators should

feel comfortable holding discussions which explore student understanding without exercising undue influence over students. The following resources from across the world may provide valuable information for how to hold these discussions:

- From Teaching Tolerance, a [Teacher-Teacher Blog about Teaching Students about Ferguson](#)
- From PBS a series of resources for [how teachers can talk with students about Ferguson](#)
- From the New York Times a [Blog with 10 tips for talking about any sensitive issue in school](#)
- From the Citizen Foundation in the UK, guidance for [having sensitive issue conversations at school](#)

While the Brown and Garner incidents have national coverage, locally we are also working to address injustice in the form of bullying. AOE recently learned of a new social media application called “afterschool app”- available in the Apple store. It is a location-based, anonymous posting phone app that targets school-aged youth, and has been used both in Vermont and nationwide to post anonymous, hateful comments and sexually graphic content. You can access it [here](#)- it may be wise to download it and check if it is already hosting a bulletin board specific to your school or schools.

We know students can’t learn when they don’t feel safe. The bottom line is that not only are we committed to ensuring our schools are safe places for all our kids—we are legally obligated to do so. If you would like to stand up for safe, strong and supportive school cultures, we encourage you to sign a petition by clicking [here](#) or visiting this link: <http://tinyurl.com/m8tuu87>. This petition was started at Rutland High School by some students who feel it is important to publicly express their commitment to the dignity and safety of their peers. We are grateful for the quick action of those of you who have worked with students and families to respond in a positive and proactive way to this venue for cyberbullying. Thank you for doing what you can to keep our students safe and for working closely with their families to ensure they feel supported.

I strongly believe education is a public trust that goes far beyond measureable academic outcomes. At the AOE, we celebrate the role our Vermont educators play in helping our youth reflect on critical social issues and developing the civic and communication skills they will need to thrive in an increasingly diverse and unequal country.